

The Society of Authors

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Open Access

The Society of Authors is a trade organisation representing over 9,000 authors. We consulted members of the Society's Academic and Medical Writers Groups about their views on the potential impact on writers of the government's new Open Access requirements.

Members condemned the very high subscription charges of many journals and emphasised how much, as writers, they appreciate cheap and easy access to research materials. They agreed that the concept of making publicly funded research freely available is attractive, and most feel that OA is here to stay.

Author pays

There is, however, considerable concern about the proposed solution to the resulting gap in the financial equation: 'author pays'. In many cases the payment will be made by the author's institution, or by a grant from one of the major funding bodies. However, 'author pays' will make publication in highly regarded journals almost impossible for the many who do not have academic posts, those in the humanities whose papers may be the product of self-funded research extending over many years, those from developing countries, those working in under-funded sectors – and OA will therefore actually be a hindrance to scholarship. This point was made repeatedly by historians, classicists, theologians and others in the arts, humanities and social sciences; and also by doctors and other medical researchers and practitioners. Indeed, a number of members feared that the impact could be even greater in science and medicine.

'Those topics in favour with the big funding organisations will come to dominate the major refereed journals, because their grants will include enough money to pay for publication.' 'Paying for publication will not necessarily mean that the most important or best-substantiated topics get the most coverage; perhaps the reverse. Anyone doing maverick research critical of corporate dominance will have great difficulty – not least because it is also a requirement for most grants to include corporate partners.' Concerns were expressed about potential 'bullying' by sponsors (be they universities or grant-giving bodies).

The impact on journals

Concerns about how OA impacts on the future viability of academic journals, especially those produced by learned societies have been well argued elsewhere by many of those journals (see, for example, www.royalhistoricalsociety.org). But in response to the suggestion that, if you do not want to pay to be included in a journal, go straight to the web for free, feedback from members suggests that publication in high quality, peer-refereed learned journals remains important:

If those who cannot pay for OA simply put research material up on the web, 'readers will be swamped by the sheer volume of material, they will have no idea of the quality of the papers being presented, and there will be a problem in that there will be no permanent "version of record" which has been validated.' Another possible outcome is that 'the articles will become chapters in edited books and thereby be even less accessible.'

Another consequence will be the lack of professional endorsement conferred by publication in the appropriate journal. For those not attached to a faculty, acceptance of their work by a highly regarded, peer-

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refereed journal is often vital for their professional credibility and indeed their career. 'If they have to pay to be published, or to find a sponsor, what does that say about their academic research? That it is not worth publishing? OA threatens the fabric of historical scholarship.'

The government is placing much emphasis on 'impact factors'. The editor of one medical journal told us that when he took on the role, the journal 'had a relatively low impact factor, and during my tenure I reduced the number of articles we published and greatly increased the input into preparing the papers properly, eliminating errors, and publicising key messages (with podcasts, mini commentaries, editorials etc). This has resulted in a doubling of our impact factor and a major increase in the number of papers being downloaded. I regard this as validation of my view that proper editing is important.' Other worries are over the survivability of the journals of learned societies, the acceptability and commercial viability of hybrid strategies, and how book reviews in journals will be funded.

Publication of theses

One other point which has come to our notice is the suggestion that a pre-condition of graduating is that the student allows his/her thesis to be made available OA online. One can freely include copyright-protected source material for purposes of an examination, but wider publication obliges the author to clear permission from rights holders. For some courses, redacting such material - or even securing access from e.g. museums and galleries to images in the first place if OA could be a default proposed use - may be impossible. Even where it is possible, we fear that rights clearances could be a very time-consuming exercise sometimes involving having to pay fees. This is likely to mean either that the student is lumbered with an onerous unexpected burden, or that s/he will simply not include (or not be able to include) such material in the thesis (which could be highly damaging to that thesis). The inclusion of such material in a doctoral thesis, for instance, may well not be covered by fair dealing; and attempting to widen copyright exceptions to address this point in our view would be very much a case of two wrongs not making a right.